

Kazakhstan

Facts and Statistics

Location: Central Asia, northwest of China; a small portion west of the Ural River in eastern-most Europe

Capital: Astana

Climate: continental, cold winters and hot summers, arid and semiarid

Population: 15,284,929 (July 2007 est.)

Ethnic Make-up: Kazakh (Qazaq) 53.4%, Russian 30%, Ukrainian 3.7%, Uzbek 2.5%, German 2.4%, Tatar 1.7%, Uygur 1.4%, other 4.9% (1999 census)

Religions: Muslim 47%, Russian Orthodox 44%, Protestant 2%, other 7%

Government: republic; authoritarian presidential rule

Language in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a bilingual country: the Kazakh language, spoken by 64.4% of the population, has the status of the "state" language, while Russian, which is spoken by almost all Kazakhstanis, is declared the "official" language, and is used routinely in business. Kazakh (also Qazaq) is a Turkic language closely related to Nogai and Karakalpak.

Kazakh People, Culture and Society

A minority in their own land

Kazakhstan is unique in that its people, the Kazakhs, did not form the majority of the population upon independence in 1991. Currently the northern part of the country is populated mostly with Ukrainian and Russian majorities while Kazakhs are more prevalent in the south. Other prevalent nationalities include Germans, Uzbeks, and Tatars, and over one hundred different nationalities reside in the country.

It is the goal of the government for the Kazakhs to become the majority of the population throughout the country. This can be seen in many overt and covert actions and policies. Many street names have reverted to their historical names. Kazakh has been declared the national language of the country (even though many native Kazakhs cannot speak their own language). Expatriated Kazakhs have been invited to return home and settle. Couples are encouraged to have large families.

It is important to note that the people of Kazakhstan, inclusive of all ethnic groups living in the country, are called Kazakhstanis. Only people of the Kazakh ethnic group are called Kazakhs. If you are not sure of someone's ethnic background, it is safest to refer to them as Kazakhstanis.

Kazakhs

The word "Kazakh" means "a free and independent nomad" in ancient Turkish. Kazakhs have travelled along the steppes of Kazakhstan from western China to the southern border of Russia for centuries.

For centuries Kazakhstan was a country of nomads and herders. Tribes were the basis of society; the tribe was constituted of family members and the family elders. Inter-tribal marriages were important in establishing security and peace. To this day, Kazakhs say, "the matchmaking lasts a thousand years, while the son-in-law lasts only a hundred." Arranged marriages are still the norm in many parts of the country.

A Patriarchal and Hierarchical Society

The Kazakhs developed a patriarchal view of the world. They banded together in extended family groups to battle the hardships of the environment and to protect their cattle and their families. This was officially called "*ata-balasy*", which means the joining of a grandfather's sons into one tribe of extended family. The husband plays the primary role in family life and is ultimately responsible for the family's survival.

Kazakhstan is also an extremely hierarchical society. Everyone has a distinct place in the hierarchy based upon family relationships. People are respected because of their age and position. Older people are viewed as wise and therefore they are granted respect. The "ways of the elders" is a popular expression that is used to explain why things are done in prescribed ways. Kazakhs expect either the eldest or the person with the highest position to make decisions that are in the best interest of the group.